DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 376 UD 031 374

AUTHOR Lopez, Thomas R.; Balzer, David M.
TITLE "Site-Based Management" and Reform. Toledo Public Schools, a Case in Point.
PUB DATE [96]
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Organization; Boards of Education; Educational Administration; *Educational Change; Educational Innovation; Elementary Education; *Governance; Institutional Autonomy; *Public Schools; *School Based Management; School Districts; Teacher Role; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Reform Efforts; *Toledo Public Schools OH

ABSTRACT

The expression "site-based management" (SBM) has become part of the rhetoric of reform of U.S. public schools. The United States has been involved in school reform efforts for many years now, including attempts at SBM. The case of the Toledo (Ohio) public schools serves as a prime example of an urban school district that, like many others, shows powerful immunity to efforts at improvement. The Toledo schools have been experimenting with SBM at three elementary schools in the last several years. In spite of the modesty of the experiment in terms of shifting authority and resources to the schools, what has been remarkable so far is the inability of the school board and the administration to implement SBM in other schools through enticing volunteers or convincing union officials to agree to expanding the modest start. Nor has there been much success in publicizing the progress at these three schools. Suspicion on the part of the teachers' union and the reluctance of principals to commit to what was seen as a high risk proposition have kept SBM at a stall. The good things that have happened, and that will happen, at these three schools result from good work done by good people, but not because of anything done by administration or union leadership. It is safe to predict that the Toledo SBM experiment will be declared "successful," but that it will not be replicated. The ironic thing about SBM is that a real shift in school governance requires a strong central authority to bring about SBM and to sustain it. If SBM could be used effectively to reflect different ends and means, it could reflect and promote needed diversity. However, the adage that people have the kind of government they deserve is no less true of the public schools. Toledo will continue to have the kind of schools it deserves. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 401 376

"Site-Based Management" and Reform Toledo Public Schools, A Case In Point.
By Thomas R. Lopez and David M. Blazer

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

X Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Thomas R. Lopez

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

UD031374

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"Site-Based Management" and Reform

Toledo Public Schools, A Case In Point

Thomas R. Lopez and David M. Balzer*

"The fools of the world believe that what they think they do is what they actually do."--F.M. Alexander

For a number of years now, the expression "site-based management" (SBM) has enjoyed currency in education circles as part of the rhetoric of "reform" of the nation's public schools. Companion terms frequently include "teacher empowerment," "decentralization," "shared decision making," "collaboration," "restructuring," as well as references to "stakeholders" in the public schools. Impassioned cries for "reform" have been ubiquitous, but reform, universally acknowledged, continues to elude. If history is any guide, whether any substantive *change* comes about as a result of all the rhetorical activity is problematic; whether any meaningful *improvement* comes about, is even more so. Indeed, it could well be the case that some of the key actors in the current "reform" effort have entered the arena to do what they can *to ensure that real change does not take place*. This country has been "involved" in the school reform effort for decades now, and American schools for the most part are remarkably unchanged. The case of Toledo, Ohio serves as a prime example of an urban school district, like so many other,

manifesting powerful immunity to efforts to improve them.

"Reformists" off all hues and stripes would have others, of course, think of them as genuine *reformers*. They can usually be counted on to adamantly call for the reform of others. In the case of the Toledo Public Schools, for example, it is instructive to talk with central office administrators, union spokesmen, executives from private sector corporations, suburbanites, interested "academics" from the universities, etc. about what they see as "the problems that need fixing" in Toledo Public Schools. Virtually everyone seems to agree that serious, unresolved structural problems exist within the houses of others; each seems remarkably clear about what *others* "need" to do to solve their problems. Moreover, everyone seems quite willing to work indefatigably to help those in such dire need to make the change--as long as the latter accept the advice and direction of those who can clearly see from their side of the fence what the problems are on the offending side.

Toledo Public Schools ostensibly has been "experimenting" with site-based management at three elementary for the last several years. Despite the modesty of the experiment in terms shifting authority and resources to the schools, what is remarkable thus far has been the utter inability of the Board and the Administration to "transport" the site-based management to other schools either through enticing volunteers or convincing union officials to agree to expand the

modest start. And despite the much heralded grand experiment in "partnership" between the Board and the education arm of the local Chamber of Commerce, there has been precious little by way of publicizing "success" stories at the three schools, or even of reporting progress. Reform by *ascription*. None of that should come as much of a surprise. The Chamber, claiming to speak for the "stakeholders" in the community, publicly insisted on a site-based management plan for the school district; and the elected School Board rushed to comply. The Toledo teachers union smelled "union-busting" possibilities if the union could not firmly control the processes of planning and implementation. The school principals, despite heavy pressure from the central administration for enthusiastic volunteers, were reluctant to commit their schools to what was seen as a high risk proposition. The lofty plans for "site based management" in Toledo never got off the ground; and even the modest experiment went into a stall. Although the rhetoric is somewhat calmer now, the experiment does in fact continue, enabling a claim of progressive experimentation while at the same time removing any threat of substantive change.

Many good things have happened--and will continue to happen--at those three schools. But they will happen because of some good work done by good people. Good things are happening not because of anything done by the people who sit around the

horseshoe table of the Board of Education, i.e., the leadership of three unions, five elected board, the superintendent and his cabinet, but in spite of them! It is no wonder when all is said and done countless numbers of teachers time after time simply report to their classrooms, shut their doors, and do their work. For them, state departments of education, central office administrators, collective bargaining agreements, and boards of education are distant abstractions that have little to do with their everyday lives. In the meantime, members of the elected Board gather monthly to ceremoniously approve every pieces of paper that placed before them and proclaim the joys of the passing seasons.

The site-based movement has not run its course as a reform effort. It is safe to predict however, that he Toledo SBM experiment eventually will be declared "successful"; those who are responsible for the program will also be the ones to render judgment. And regardless of whether what goes on in those and other schools bears any substantive resemblance to SBM reform efforts as faintly recognizable by others elsewhere, one can be sure that Board members will proudly proclaim " a bold turnaround" in upcoming campaigns, regardless of evidence that any improvement has been effectuated. Everyone will have a vested interest in declaring victory, ensuring a generous distribution of feathers for adorning caps and an uninterrupted supply of public money, administrative positions,

consulting opportunities, and issues to haggle over at the bargaining table, thereby keeping governing authority over the school district in the familiar hands of those already at the table.

*****

Let us take a look at SBM as a reform effort beyond the public relations grounds and political machinations of interest groups.

First, it is a widely held view that American primary and secondary education is over managed and probably needs to be decentralized. Some critics go even farther, of course, argue that the schools should be "privatized," or at least administered by private management firms. Critics, however, are looking in the wrong places. The problem of excessive centralized control is not at the level of the local school district; quite the contrary, the problem is located in the state capitals, *viz.* the state boards of education.

The diversity that is thought to be required to "restore" the dynamism and vitality of American education is reflected to a certain extent by local school boards and will be *expressed only through local control.* But the precious institution of local control must be reinvigorated by state and legislatures and restored to health. Only state legislatures can do that. The role of state departments of education must be radically circumscribed; and state officials will have to be prevented from continuing the historical practice of micro-managing the schools. Above all, school boards will need broad

discretionary authority to hire the best people it can regardless of arbitrary licensure and credentials of professional who use the apparatus of state government to guarantee monopolies for the delivery of their services. Bureaucracy, excessive regulation, radical monopolies on the part of professional educators (administrators, perhaps being the worst cases), "mandates," norm-referenced tests, etc., etc. have sapped the vitality of public schools to such an extent that, frankly, it is highly problematic whether that trend can be reversed. The superintendency does not need to be weakened for site-based management. His authority and that of the Board to whom he is responsible, at least nominally, needs to be strengthened, as ironic as it may seem, to do the work that needs to be done for site-based management and the empowerment of others to become a reality. And that could well include a serious, authentic venture into site-based management and other manifestations of shared decision-making.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that almost any competent and experienced administrator recognizes the value, indeed, the necessity, of delegating authority and of avoiding the pitfalls of excessive control. Schools generally have acted on this recognition well before school reformists from American corporations seem to have discovered, that there are indeed alternatives alternatives to tyranny and top-down directions as a management

model. School administrators have long recognized the value of shared-decision making models as a function of experience and out of necessity of working with others in collective bargaining environments. Charges of excessive top-down control on the part of the central administration as an argument for site-based management in the case of the Toledo Public School district, for example, is particularly spurious. The general perception throughout the city, repeatedly documented by outside observers, and certainly within professional circles, is that, particularly the teachers' union, "runs the district." While that too may be off the mark, the fact of the matter is that shared governance is already ratified, by long-standing practice, operational necessity, and by the contracts that are commonly damned , at least by the administrators union, as detrimental to the interests of the school district. A recurring refrain, at least in their quarter, is that the contract with the teachers union impairs their ability to properly administer the individual schools, the school district generally, and to make needed changes. The Toledo School District is not known for either strong superintendencies for many years or for distinguished elected school boards. The popular perception, unfair and erroneous as it may be, is that the central administration represents a bloated, faceless bureaucracy whose services are of known or questionable vale to the educational mission of the District. The problem is Toledo, then, is clearly not only of

highly centralized, heavy-handed top-down leadership. Indeed, problems may lay in the opposite direction, i.e. inability to manage a complex organization, uninspired leaderships, and persistent role-confusion and sentimental and ineffective boardsmanship on the part of elected officials.

Site-Based Management, in any case, is unfortunately named. The management skills needed these days in urban school districts are the ability to move complex organizations from one point to the next. Management skills include intra-mural politics and the ability to deal effectively with unions as head of an organization and not merely service as chairman of a small cabinet of school officers. We need fewer "managers" in the usual sense. What we do need are leaders with ideas and skills. We need fewer administrative technicians and well-paid masters of ceremony and more men and women with imagination, an understanding of local control of American education, and some determination to lead toward a better future.

The ironic thing about site-based management is that a real shift in governance authority requires a very strong central authority not only to bring SBM about but to sustain it under the stress that inevitably ensues. American Federal history is instructive--states are powerful to the extent that the national government creates

conditions for their freedom of action. If the central authority is excessively weakened, centripetal forces prevail and the organization disintegrates. The former Soviet Union is a case in point. Highly centralized leadership on the part of the bargaining units, i.e., the Unions, is not going to be eager to bargain with decentralized administrative units and multiple spokesmen for management; nor can the unions be expected to create site-based entities for purpose of decentralized collective bargaining.

Almost everyone agrees that American vitality and creativity rest on diversity. We must learn to acknowledge it, live with it, adapt our institutional practice to accommodate it, encourage it and use it. Easy to say, difficult to do. It is diversity that is lacking in American public education and it is diversity that is needed. Site-based management if it can be used to effect rather reform rather than cosmetic change or to reinforce the *status quo*, may--could, under the right set of circumstances--reflect and promote needed diversity. SBM could reflect differentials ends and means within a broad general framework. Ironically, just as some people are discovering some of the possible benefits of pluralism, there are renewed forces at work to reinforce processes of standardization and bureaucratic expansion. National tests for example will inevitably lead to national curricula and bureaucratization to monitor and promote programs toward prescribed national goals. As it is, despite the immense size of

the United States and the wide diversity that characterizes so much of American life, public school are remarkable for their sameness comparable to local franchises of a national chain catering to the lowest common denominator. If SBM in Toledo is to become a serious commitment, we must ask ourselves if we are truly prepared **not only allow** each school to redefine itself, **but positively encourage** it to do so. Success will at least partly be determined by the extent to which each school is different from the others in methods, site-based determined goals, policies, and governance. But movement in the direction of uniqueness is not sufficient...it must be successful by something other than ascription. SBM in Toledo will be nothing more than a sham and a hoax if the District does not provide for the right of parents to choose or reject a SBM school for their children. If a particular SBM cannot earn and keep the support of a prescribed number of parents, it must be deemed a failure within the system, followed by corrective measures to include career reversals for its professional staff leadership. By the same token, professionals must be protected from unwarranted influence from others in order for them to do their work. That is the solemn responsibility of the members of the Board as public officials. The members of the Board, above all, must be champions of local control of public schools. Americans have long known that centralized authority leads to tyranny and that American liberty is best protected through keeping

government as close to the people as possible. The American public school is the epitome of that tradition. In that sense, site-based management not only makes good sense from an operational point of view, it is essential to protect and nurture a democratic society. It is often pointed out that in a democracy, people have the kind of government they deserve. That is no less true of public education. We now have in Toledo, Ohio and will continue to have the kind of schools we deserve.

*Thomas R. Lopez is professor of educational foundations at The University of Toledo, and a former member of the Toledo Board of Education. He is chief grievance officer of the UT-AAUP,collective bargaining agent. David Balzer is professor of elementary education, also at The University of Toledo and former president of the UT-AAUP.